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Evaluation

Evaluation of the regional cooperation framework for Arab States, 2006-2009

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I. Introduction

1. The present report provides a summary of the findings of the evaluation of the third regional cooperation framework (RCF) for the Arab States, 2006-2009, which the Evaluation Office submits to the Executive Board. The evaluation was carried out between August 2008 and January 2009.

2. The evaluation was designed to assess the overall programme performance and outcomes of the third RCF in the Arab States, as well as to evaluate contributions of UNDP through the RCF to development results in the region. In assessing the relevance and development effectiveness of the RCF, the evaluation covered the following areas: (a) performance of the RCF programme portfolio and the results achieved, including the achievement of the immediate objectives of the constituent programmes; (b) strategic positioning and focus of the RCF and its relevance to the country and regional priorities; (c) value addition of the regional programme in the context of Arab States vis-à-vis global and country programmes; (d) organizational strategy, modalities and mechanisms, including linkages to UNDP strategies and frameworks; (e) synergic relationships between various components of the RCF; and (f) sustainability of RCF interventions and ownership by regional and national stakeholders after the intervention is completed.

3. The evaluation findings and recommendations are intended to contribute to the formulation of the next regional programme and its alignment with UNDP strategic plan, 2008-2011.

4. The present evaluation builds on outcome evaluations commissioned by the Regional Bureau for Arab States in 2008 – those outcome evaluations aimed at assessing the contribution of six regional projects to the fulfilment of the three strategic pillars of the regional programme, 2006-2009. The present evaluation attempted to take the outcome evaluation findings, conclusions, and recommendations to a higher level by emphasizing assessment of the RCF 'added value' in a regional context, as well as determining the role of the programme in strategically positioning UNDP relative to regional development priorities and its strategy. The methodology included a comprehensive desk review and analysis of outcome and programme/project evaluations, monitoring reports, and other self-assessment reports. This was supplemented with visits to four countries in the region—Egypt, Lebanon, Tunisia and United Arab Emirates—and consultations with key partners in the region as well as specialists at UNDP headquarters. Country visits allowed the evaluation team to: (a) validate findings of the desk reviews; (b) identify good practices and lessons for the future at the country and regional level; and (c) obtain on-site knowledge of how the RCF links to country level priorities and vertical integration.

II. Main findings

Regional cooperation framework and programmes

5. The RCF is organized into three pillars: Millennium Development Goal (MDG) achievement; democratic governance; and building a knowledge society. This is supplemented with 'youth' as a crosscutting issue. Several programmes fall under each pillar, but also weave between some or all other pillars, as well as the crosscutting issue. The Arab Human Development Reports, a regional flagship programme that provides analysis of development issues relevant to the region, contribute to each pillar and play an important advocacy and awareness role.

6. Contributing to the democratic governance and knowledge pillars, the programmes on 'governance in the Arab region', 'good governance for development', 'parliamentary strengthening', and 'prosecutors programme' cover such issues as rule of law, human rights, e-government, administrative simplification, judiciary reform, participation in elections, and enhancement of good governance through transparency and accountability. The 'information and communications technology for development' project in the Arab region supports use of information and communications technologies for human development and falls under the pillars of democratic governance, knowledge building, and youth. The HIV/AIDS regional programme raises awareness of, and builds commitment and leadership towards, fighting HIV/AIDS and contributes to the MDG achievement pillar.

7. Three projects specifically support the knowledge pillar and cut across the youth issue. These are: (a) 'trends in international mathematics and science study', which promotes quality reform in educational policies for teaching mathematics and science using accurate data and analysis of factors that affect the learning process; (b) 'quality assurance and institutional planning in Arab universities', which promotes a system of education evaluation for quality assurance of academic programmes in Arab universities and introduces institutional planning based on analysis of relevant statistical data; and (c) the Arab Knowledge Report, which is a new initiative that builds upon the 2003 Arab Human Development Report, and contributes to 'building a knowledge society.'

8. The Centre for Arab Women Training and Research, which became an independent institution in 2006, strives to enhance the capacity of Arab institutions to empower women to exercise their rights and achieve equality. Two new initiatives, the 'Arab trade and development programme' that started in 2007, and the 'water governance programme for the Arab States' that started in 2009, contribute to the MDG achievement and democratic governance pillars, as well as youth. The first aims to enhance the capacities of Arab countries to use economic governance as a tool for safeguarding and accelerating human development in the context of globalized trade. The goal of the water governance programme is to improve the use and management of scarce water resources (on the supply and demand sides) to improve water supply and sanitation, and promote an integrated approach to water resources management.

Programme financial structure and resource mobilization

9. The total budget for the first three years of the RCF (2006-2008) amounted to $30,244,658, with core resources totaling $9,510,933, and other resources totaling $20,733,725; the largest allocation of funds was for the democratic governance pillar. The cost-sharing approach used by the regional programme generated interest among donors, including private foundations and businesses.

10. A large spectrum of donors contributed to a variety of project clusters. Contributions have been received from bilateral donors, the European Union, participating countries in the region, foundations and the private sector. In addition, there has been parallel financing to a number of projects. The evaluation revealed a marked absence of Arab State donors, with the exception of Tunisia and Algeria, especially in view of the prevalence of wealthy net contributor countries. Bilateral donors constitute the bulk among donors.

Relevance of the regional cooperation framework

11. The RCF, 2006-2009 has, generally speaking, been relevant to the priorities and the needs of the Arab region. In most cases, the RCF has been positioned to address issues at the regional level that could not have been adequately addressed within the country programmes in all of the countries in the region. The issues have included sensitive

areas related to democratic governance, transparency, accountability and social issues, such as gender equality and HIV/AIDS. The RCF brought these issues to the forefront of the discussion in the region, and the articulation of the issues was a major contribution of the framework, as was raising consciousness for seeking remedies. The Arab Human Development Reports, in particular, generated knowledge and provided a regional platform for discussion on priority topics, including the role of women and the education and knowledge gaps pervasive in the region.

12. The work of the regional programme on HIV/AIDS has been particularly relevant to the region, where the epidemic is not openly discussed. However, the programme has brought HIV/AIDS into the open through regional dialogue.

13. Education-related projects under the knowledge society pillar addressed the knowledge deficit in the Arab region through providing assistance to Arab universities to promote a culture of evaluation, educational quality improvement and reform, and focusing on educational policies for teaching mathematics and science.

14. Under the democratic governance pillar, programmes such as Programme of Governance in the Arab Region (www.pogar.org) addressed key issues pertaining to good governance and judicial reform through advocacy, policy dialogue and training. Similarly, information and communications technology has been promoted as a way for democratization.

15. Trade and job creation are significant endeavours, irrespective of whether the country is an oil exporter, middle-income or low-income. The relatively recent work initiated by UNDP in this area responds to a priority need.

16. Cross-thematic strategic partnerships were established with the objective of capitalizing on the efforts and resources that UNDP and other organizations can bring to bear on regional development problems. The three programmatic pillars that support the RCF are mutually reinforcing and the accomplishments of one pillar have spill-over effects on the others. The synergy among the three pillars is clear and meaningful. The programmes that contribute to the realization of the pillars, by and large, tackle the problems that are common to the member countries of the region.

17. The efforts to secure equity and social inclusion consisted of special emphasis on gender equality and the empowerment and participation of women. The special attention paid to issues related to youth as a crosscutting theme in a region where the young population has high preponderance in the age pyramid is an added point to the relevance of the RCF.

18. The RCF has succeeded in tackling some vital problems in the region. It is, nevertheless, clear that the RCF activities have concentrated sub-regionally and the agenda has tended to be driven by the policy issues facing middle-income countries. In particular, the RCF has only had limited reach to net contributor countries and to least developed countries (with the possible exception of Yemen). Because of its built-in flexibility, it succeeded in addressing the diverse needs of the countries with different intensity in different countries. There is significant scope in all existing programmes to enhance sub-regional approaches based on characteristics of the country groupings.

Effectiveness

19. The programmes under the RCF have been most effective in advocacy and policy dialogue on common priority issues in the region. The programmes have also developed the capacities of government institutions, non-governmental and governmental organizations, and religious leaders with which they worked by encouraging policy dialogue, building and disseminating knowledge on issues that are pertinent to the region. The programmes were able to create partnerships with a host of

Arab governments, civil society and non-governmental organizations, and academic and policy institutions.

20. The outcomes of the programmes have contributed, though in different degrees, to the realization of the expected results of the three pillars. The greatest value added has been in advocacy interventions by which policy makers, as well as civil society actors, have become familiar with some of the most pressing issues of the region, such as governance, rule of law, corruption and participation in the political process, in particular. The success of RCF in raising awareness and debate on sensitive issues has enhanced its effectiveness. In particular, the Arab Human Development Reports have encouraged region-wide discussion on development issues.

21. Important initiatives in the area of gender were the publication of the 2005 Arab Human Development Report on the topic Towards the Rise of Women in the Arab World and the 2007 study on Regional Gender Equality and Women Empowerment programme for Arab States, which will contribute to mainstream gender in the next regional cooperation framework and country programmes as well.

22. A concrete outcome emanating from the second Arab Human Development Report is the new Arab Knowledge Report project, which has led to a unique partnership with the Mohammed Bin Rashid Al Maktoum Foundation. This partnership has institutionalized the follow up to one of the key issues identified in the Arab Human Development Reports. There is also indication that the Arab Human Development Reports have influenced policies of other development organizations, including some bilateral donors, active in the region.

23. The projects in education added significant value to the youth dimension in the Arab region and contributed to the realization of the knowledge pillar of RCF. The projects responded to a regional need for improvement in education quality, achieving results in the areas of education reform and policies, evaluation culture and creation of knowledge products.

24. The programmes under the governance cluster have allocated a significant amount of resources to building and disseminating knowledge. Its dual focus has been on rule of law and participation, with four distinct, interdependent areas: judicial reform; criminal justice policies and systems; anti-corruption measures; and enhancing the quality of legislation and regulations. Human rights, as well as gender, youth, and environment, are mainstreamed into these four areas of work in coordination with the concerned United Nations organizations. The programme has provided a one-stop online window to a wide selection of parliamentary development resources and knowledge products and thereby tried to encourage the use of information and communication technologies in accessing information and knowledge products to support parliamentary work in the region by conducting research studies on the representative function of the parliament, the role of the parliament in promoting decentralization and in fighting corruption. The creation of websites specifically for the area of democratic governance, but that also touch upon issues of human rights, gender, and human development, have contributed to knowledge production, accumulation and dissemination, serving as reference instruments for Arab countries as well as a dialogue platform.

25. The programme on information and communications technologies has targeted different sectors of society to provide the necessary knowledge for awareness raising and capacity development and, at the same time, has produced initiatives aimed at poverty reduction focusing on youth, medium and small enterprises, and people with disabilities. It introduced information and communication technologies as a tool for easy access to information and social services, for acquisition of skills, and to build awareness of human rights.

26. The HIV/AIDS programme at the regional and country level has contributed to raising awareness of policy makers, religious leaders, civil society organizations and the Arab public on the disease and its carriers. It has successfully instituted a regional advocacy programme that will pave the way for future actions to include mainstreaming HIV/AIDS strategies in national policies.

27. Since most of the activities on trade and development are still new, it is premature to assess their effectiveness or results.

Sustainability

28. The sustainability of the RCF results depends upon two conditions: whether the results of many upstream projects, such as advocacy, policy advice and capacity development, can be converted into downstream projects; and whether a firm linkage can be achieved between RCF and the UNDP country programmes. The results of the regional programmes will be sustainable provided that advocacy and policy advice generated within the projects are internalized by the national governments and further policy decisions are built on them. Partnership with the country offices are essential for regional programme sustainability because follow-up at the country level to the regional initiatives is necessary. The RCF does not have the resources, nor does it have the reach at country level, to provide continued support to build upon regional efforts.

29. Each regional programme has its own internal dynamics that determines its sustainability. The degree of acceptance by the governments and the skills that have been developed in the public sector suggest good prospects for sustainability for the results achieved under the democratic governance pillar. The sustainability of the activities enhancing women's rights will depend upon the extent to which civil society institutions are strengthened and governments adopt the policy advice.

30. Under the poverty pillar, the results of the trade and development programme need to be institutionalized in national policies. However, it is too early to provide an assessment whether this is happening. Similarly, combating HIV/AIDS requires specific actions in particular countries and the sustainability of results of the regional programme will depend upon the extent to which country offices, together with other United Nations organizations, and the governments, can internalize results achieved so far and design national programmes.

31. There is evidence that the knowledge society pillar is achieving sustainability partly through the institutionalization of the work initiated under the Arab Human Development Report within the scope of the new Arab Knowledge Report project, which responds to a need in the region and has attracted significant external funding. The results achieved under the education sector programme need to be sustained while UNDP is seeking an exit strategy from the area, which does not fall within its corporate comparative advantage.

Challenges

32. The RCF was faced with several shortcomings, most of which stemmed from how it was designed. The regional programme document did not define the expected outcomes or the corresponding indicators that would allow for measuring results in a meaningful manner. In some cases, indicators are defined in such a way as to be devoid of operational value. In others, the indicators are pedestrian and linked only to activities and outputs.

33. Secondly, the coordination between the RCF and the country programmes in the region is weak at best, and in many cases non-existent. There is a marked absence of concrete projects at the operational level with sustainable results that emanate from the

advocacy efforts. To achieve this would require more operational linkages to country programmes, which would have to be forged early at the design stage.

34. Funding for the RCF from UNDP core resources has been limited, which has implications on the scope and reach of the programme. It is evident that, while the overall thrust of the RCF has been appropriate, several of the programmes have been spread too thinly, as they have been directed by resource mobilization opportunities. The resource mobilization efforts, with some notable exceptions, have not adequately tapped regional sources, including governments.

35. The United Nations Office for Project Services is the primary executing partner for programmes of the RCF. For some projects, this arrangement has not been satisfactory due to lack of substantive backstopping and delays in administrative support.

III. Conclusions

36. The Arab States RCF, 2006-2009, has addressed central development issues in the region. It has drawn attention to needs that are difficult to resolve because of their sensitivity and because of difficulties surrounding advocacy originating from individual UNDP country programmes. There are a number of broad conclusions that will need attention in the future.

Need for a results framework

37. The weak results framework with inadequate definition of outcomes has hampered the focus of the RCF as well as evaluating the effectiveness of its results. A fundamental lesson from the RCF is that a solid design of the programme is necessary in order to assess its results and outcomes. This entails defining the outcomes at the outset, including clear baselines and indicators for their achievement. A logical model that explains how the activities and outputs are intended to lead to the outcomes will be very helpful.

Coordination with country programmes

38. The effectiveness and sustainability of the regional programme is largely dependent on its relevance and linkages to the work of UNDP at the country level. While the purpose of the RCF is not to directly serve country offices, both are guided by UNDP priorities and its strategic plan. Activities at the regional level—especially knowledge creation and advocacy—often requires follow-up at the country level in order to reach objectives and sustainability. Therefore, country office ownership of issues tackled by the regional programme will be beneficial. Generating ownership should start at formulation stage and should continue throughout the programme. This will require close communication between the regional programme and country offices. It is important to select the country offices participating in regional activities based on their interest and commitment. In that regard, new RCF provides an excellent opportunity to improve communications and coordination.

Need for focus

39. Resource limitations of the RCF underline the importance of having a highly focused programme. Unless there are significant external funding sources, it will be better to limit the number of activities in order to enhance the reach and depth of the programme. There are significant opportunities for fund-raising from national sources, donor organizations and the private sector at the country level for specific programmes and activities. However, it is important that any fund-raising efforts adhere to an overall strategy that guarantees the coherence of the programme.

Sub-regional focus

40. The RCF agenda has been largely defined by middle-income countries, which have benefited the most from advocacy, policy dialogue and capacity development; most least developed countries have been left out. Similarly, RCF participation by net contributor countries has been very limited. Nevertheless, there would be significant scope for involving both groups, especially regarding knowledge and advocacy on priority issues pertaining to their development challenges. Net contributor countries would also be in an advantageous position to continue with regional initiatives at the national level using their own resources. This would provide an opportunity for UNDP to promote human development approaches in the region.

IV. Recommendations

41. *Recommendation 1.* The overall objectives of the RCF should be reviewed with a view to concentrating on fewer areas with clearly defined outcomes and strategic trust. The RCF should be aligned with the directions and principles of the UNDP strategic plan, recognizing country-specific circumstances. Programmes should be brought in line with programmatic priorities of the strategic plan focus areas. A knowledge-based approach to South-South cooperation, where experiences are transferred or exchanged between countries in the region, should continue to be a main modality of the RCF.

42. *Recommendation 2.* The RCF should explore enhancing sub-regional approaches based on distinctions between the developmental levels of countries in the region and corresponding development policies. There are marked socioeconomic differences among countries in the region (least developed countries, net contributor countries and middle-income countries), which renders a one-size-fits-all approach difficult. Taking note of contextual differences in the region complies with the emphasis of the UNDP strategic plan on greater country specificity.

43. *Recommendation 3.* A better balance must be struck between knowledge generation and capacity development, as well as the transformation of policy advice into specific projects. Concrete efforts should be made as a follow-up to regional advocacy and policy dialogue initiatives. In many cases, such efforts would fall beyond the scope of the regional programme and would require follow-up at the country level by UNDP country programmes and national partners. Country office management should be involved at all stages of the planning and implementation of the RCF in order to ensure alignment with country programmes.

44. *Recommendation 4.* Gender mainstreaming and, in recognition of the demographic configuration of the region, youth, should remain crosscutting issues. In particular, the development of productive sectors, employment and trade policies are central from a gender and youth perspective. Developing a dedicated project designed specifically to meet youth issues would be appropriate, since it would properly fix the attention exclusively on youth and will be more conducive to monitor and evaluate its success.

45. *Recommendation 5.* Programmes in the areas of poverty reduction and democratic governance should continue to form the focus of the programme. Environment and sustainable development, as a new component of the regional programme, is fully aligned with the strategic plan and the regional priorities. The programmatic activities developed under it should be closely aligned with the governance and poverty reduction focus areas of the RCF. Given the serious resource constraints of the regional programme, and the existence of a dedicated bureau in UNDP, the evaluation cautions against addressing crisis prevention and recovery in the RCF.

46. *Recommendation 6.* The Arab Human Development Report should be separated from the regional programme and become independent. It is suggested that a separate fund be set up with, *inter alia*, private sector contributions from the region. The Arab Human Development Report should still remain under the purview of UNDP in order to maintain its neutrality and high quality, but this arrangement would secure continuity, ownership and sustainability.

47. *Recommendation 7.* Resource mobilization efforts should tap into the financial resources of the region, including from net contributor countries as well as public and private sources. Individual programmes should be encouraged to mobilize additional resources and facilitate the application procedures of these funds, providing overall guidance with regard to the alignment with the regional programme focus and corporate resource mobilization strategies.